



## **H.R. 797 – Dr. James Allen Veteran Vision Equity Act**

### **Floor Situation**

H.R. 797 is being considered on the floor under suspension of the rules and will require a two-thirds majority vote for passage. This legislation was introduced by Representative Tammy Baldwin (D-WI) on February 5, 2007. The bill was ordered to be reported from the Committee on Veterans' Affairs, by voice vote, on February 15, 2007.

H.R. 797 was agreed to in the House by a vote of 424 to 0.

The Senate passed an amended version of this legislation (S. 1163) by unanimous consent on November 2, 2007.

The amended version of H.R. 797 is expected to be considered on the floor on December 11, 2007.

### **Summary**

H.R. 797 lowers the requirement for receiving disability compensation through the Department of Veterans Affairs for veterans with eye impairments as a result of service-connected disability or non-service-connected disability.

The bill defines the requirement for compensation as the "impairment in each eye is to a visual acuity of 20/200 or less or a peripheral field loss of 20 degrees or less." The current definition requires legal blindness to receive disability compensation. By lowering this restriction, the VA is coming inline with Medicare and Social Security.

The bill also requires the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to provide the Secretary of Health and Human Services with information regarding the National Directory of New Hires, for the purpose of determining eligibility for means tested benefits provided by title 38.

H.R. 797 continues the authorization of the veterans work study program through June 2010. The program's authorization expired June 30, 2007.

The bill permits families of veterans to choose a medallion or other device of a design determined by the Secretary for placement on a privately procured grave marker in lieu of a headstone provided by the Federal government.

H.R. 797 includes a provision that expands the use of a grant program that helps states establish, expand, or improve state owned veterans' cemeteries to allow the use of the

grant funding for operating and maintenance of the cemeteries. The aggregate amount of the grants awarded may not exceed \$5 million.

**Background**

The Department of Veterans Affairs currently holds that to receive disability compensation due to blindness, a veterans' vision must be deemed legally blind. Other Federal agencies, such as Medicare and Social Security, do not maintain this stricter standard and the VA is coming in line with the rest of the government.

Also, studies have shown that if a person loses sight in one eye due to injury, the other eye degenerates and creates vision problems. Currently, the VA does not cover disability when a veteran experiences vision problems with an eye that was not injured while in service. The bill will correct this oversight and cover disability if a veteran experiences vision problems that are non-service-connected.

Current law only permits families to choose a government headstone for graves already marked by a privately procured grave marker.

Under current law, work study benefits expire on June 30, 2007.

**CBO Estimate**

CBO has not scored the Senate-passed version of this legislation.

**Staff Contact**

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